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OMAN TO EXPERIENCE SOLAR ECLIPSE TODAY

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

MUSCAT: Oman is to experience the annular solar eclipse on Sunday morning as the Oman Astronomical Society has been spreading awareness on safety measures to be followed during the event. Making this an exceptional experience, the narrow annular path is expected to pass through some of the governorates of Oman. Abdulwahab al Busaidy, member of



the Oman Astronomical Society, said, "We are so lucky to have this and even if you are in Suhar or Salalah and anywhere in Al Wusta Governorate, you would be able to experience 85 to 90 per cent eclipse. In Muscat there will be an experience of 96 per cent". A distinct feature of the annular eclipse is the 'ring of fire' or the ring of light that appears as the moon faces the sun and comes between the earth and the sun.

TURN TO P3

Resident Card, sponsor details mandatory for COVID-19 test



VINOD NAIR

MUSCAT: The government on Saturday said that all residents have to furnish the Resident Card or a valid telephone number for COVID-19 testing. This announcement came as the Ministry of Health (MoH) on Saturday reported 896 new cases, including 391 Omanis and 505 residents and three deaths. All residents to be tested will have to show proof of company name and have their PRO/company representative or sponsor name (via Resident ID). In exceptional cases of having no Resident Card, the expatriate will have to provide valid mobile number.

TURN TO P3

SALALAH MARKET AREA ISOLATED OVER COVID-19 SCARE



KAUSHALENDRA SINGH

SALALAH: In the wake of recent spike in COVID-19 cases in Salalah, the authorities have sealed a market area opposite old Oman Cinema area. According to the latest COVID-19 bulletin of the Ministry of Health, Dhofar recorded 26 new cases with a total number to 326, while 296 of them are

from Salalah with 25 new cases. According to the local authorities the isolation of the market is part of the precautionary measures to combat the spread of the virus, which witnessed sudden rise in positive cases in Salalah. Till the end of May, Salalah had only 28 positive cases, which reached up to 72 by June 12. There was a sudden increase to 81 cases on June 14, which brought total number of cases to 153. There has been increase in the numbers since then. The current numbers stand at 326 in the Dhofar Governorate, out of which 296 are from Salalah. With 48 recoveries the number of currently sick is 246. The level of alertness in the city is generally high with use of masks, hand gloves and social distancing in public places.

OMAN

MORE COUNTRIES OPERATE REPATRIATION FLIGHTS

KABEER YOUSUF

MUSCAT: More countries have come forward to repatriate their citizens to their home town in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the past few weeks, several flights, majority to Asian countries, have taken off from both Muscat International Airport and Salalah Airport carrying thousands who got stranded due to airport closure, employees who lost jobs, pregnant women and those who needed medical assistance.

THE PHILIPPINES

The first repatriation flight instituted by the Embassy of the Philippines in the Sultanate took off on Saturday. This will be followed by more flights in the coming days. "We will continue to arrange more repatriation flights for those who wish to go home in the wake of the coronavirus," an embassy spokesperson has said. The repatriation flight was facilitated by the embassy with the support of the Filipino community in Oman for people who lost jobs.

INDIA

Nearly 15,000 Indians have made use of the repatriation flights announced by Indian government, as well as the charter flights organised by NGOs and private organisations. "We have been transporting our citizens since May 8 when the Vande Bharat flight repatriation services began and nearly 10,000 people have made use of the services to various states of India," an embassy source has said.

PAKISTAN

Pakistan operated three flights on June 18 carrying 530 passengers in all, according to the Embassy



of Pakistan. "We operated three flights to Islamabad, Karachi and Multan, thanks to the Oman authorities, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the ROP and the Oman Airports," said KK Ahsan Wagan, Ambassador of Pakistan to the Sultanate, adding that more flights are on cards.

GERMANY

The German Embassy is planning to operate a special flight on July 5 for German, EU and other nationals who are stranded due to airport closure. "For the operation to be viable, we must meet some conditions without which the

services wouldn't be possible," a source at the German Embassy has told the Observer.

SRI LANKA

OL Ameer Ajwad, Sri Lankan Ambassador to the Sultanate, said that the diplomatic mission has plans to operate a flight soon. This will be followed by more flights if there is demand.

NEPAL

Nepal operated two charter flights the second of which took off with 147 passengers onboard on June 18. "The prime requisite for a

passenger was to have PCR negative report and we successfully operated two flights," Sharmila Parajuli Dhakal, Nepal Ambassador to the Sultanate, said. The first flight was on June 15, which had 166 passengers onboard.

CHINA

China carried out a charter flight carrying 232 citizens from Muscat to Guangzhou. "This is the only flight we operated as of now and we have no confirmation about another flight that we might operate in the future," a senior diplomat told the Observer.

UZBEKISTAN

Uzbekistan operated a charter flight on June 10 connecting Muscat and Doha which helped more than 100 citizens get back to their homes. "More than 100 passengers from both Oman and Qatar were transported to Tashkent," said Anver Abdul Kalil, Ambassador of Uzbekistan.

THE NETHERLANDS

"Yes we are helping our citizens return back home to the Netherlands with stopovers in London. So we track which flights are announced from Oman Air," an official of the Embassy of the Netherlands said.

First group completes Etimad programme

MUSCAT: The first batch of the National Leadership Programme to upskill and empower Omanis for middle and senior management positions in the private sector completed the Etimad training programme.

The group comprises employees of leading private companies in various sectors who have completed the training requirements which will enable them to assume senior and middle management positions in the private sector.

The training programme utilised interactive electronic learning provided by local and global training partners. The participants displayed their projects in the fields of tourism, mining, communication, oil and gas manufacturing and others through online sessions.

It is worth noting that Etimad has been adopted as one of the outcomes of the National Program for Enhancing Economic Diversification (Tanfeedh). The Ministry of Manpower oversees the programme implementation while the Implementation Support and Follow-up Unit (ISFU) follows up and supports the implementation process. — **ONA**

SULTANATE TO EXPERIENCE SOLAR ECLIPSE TODAY

FROM PAGE 1

“Hundreds of astrophotographers in Oman have stationed themselves at strategic locations to capture the moment”, added Al Busaidy. Mohammed al Battashi, member of OAS explained the campaign which started 12 months ago to alert the community by increasing awareness, gain knowledge and most importantly enjoy the event.

“Last December we had arranged a camp. This time it will be a virtual broadcast. The eclipse will cover most of the continents except the Americas, but the annular path is narrow and this line in Oman passes through South of Bahla, Manah, Samad Al Shan, Izki, Tayeen, Qurayat and exit from Sifah”, said Al Battashi. The OAS had been distributing safety glasses and brochures on the best photography techniques for best shots (with special filters) of the sun covered by moon.

SAFETY FIRST

“It is extremely important not to look at the eclipse with the naked eyes as it can cause permanent damage to the eyes”, warned Al Busaidy adding, “Astrophotographers have special filters and others have solar eclipse glasses. It is available in the market, but please do not use the ordinary sunglasses”.

RESIDENT CARD, SPONSOR DETAILS MUST FOR COVID-19 TEST

FROM PAGE 1

“Not providing a valid and correct mobile number and absence of civil ID can result in deficiencies in follow-up care, which will be the entire responsibility of the individual. Ministry of Health will not be responsible for consequences in such instances”, the statement added.

The total number of cases in the country has now touched 28,566.

With three new deaths reported on Saturday, the number of people who lost lives due to COVID-19 reached 128.

The MoH said that 806 patients recovered during the past 24 hours, taking the total number of recoveries to 14,780. With 63 people admitted to the hospital during this period, the number of hospital patients now stands at 411, including 99 in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). Muscat recorded 615 new cases on Saturday, followed by South Al Batinah 95, North Al Batinah 66, Al Dakhiliyah 37, Dhofar 26, North Al Sharqiyah 25, South Al Sharqiyah and Al Wusta 11 each.

The Directorate-General of Health Services in Muscat has revised timings and locations of outreach clinics established for all residents from June 21.

Medical Fitness Examination Centres in Darsait, Seeb, Rusayl and the centre in Bausher (next to Khimji compound) will operate between 8.30 am and 1 pm.





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ENTREPRENEURIAL DRIVE HELPED EASE COVID-19 IMPACT

SAMUEL KUTTY

MUSCAT: As many as 442 research proposals, including 103 in clinical category and 339 non-clinical, have been received at Oman's Research Council as part of the COVID-19 research programme.

This is revealed in a report by Azzan al Busaidi, Chief Executive Officer, Ithraa, Oman's investment promotion and export development agency.

The research programme is set up with a scope of covering clinical and public health areas including telemedicine, therapeutics and diagnostics, as well as environmental impacts of the coronavirus.

"All funded projects are planned to be executed over the next three to 12 months, aiming to produce applied and practical results," Al Busaidi said in the report presented on the virtual COVID-19 Action Platform of the World Economic Forum at the weekend.

He said that even as the coronavirus is taking its toll, thanks to strategies adopted under different programmes, the Sultanate's response to the pandemic has been a success.

"Oman's plans for a



AZZAN AL BUSAIDI, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, ITHRAA, POINTED OUT THAT IN FEBRUARY, OMAN'S INDUSTRIAL INNOVATION CENTRE RALLIED INNOVATIVE TECH START-UPS AND SMES TO FORM A TEAM THAT PRODUCED VENTILATORS AND USED 3D PRINTING TO MANUFACTURE FACE MASKS

sustainable future have been put to the test by COVID-19, but its entrepreneurial drive has helped lessen the impact," he said.

The chief of Oman's inward investment and export development agency said that building on Vision 2020, and consolidating the gains of the last 25 years in Oman, Vision 2040 takes into account globalisation and ongoing developments in technology.

"Both strategies have had a strong focus on investment in infrastructure, telecommunications and the creation of a digitally literate, entrepreneurial society," he said.

Elucidating the technology advancement in the country, Al Busaidi pointed out that in February, Oman's Industrial Innovation Centre rallied innovative tech start-ups and SMEs to form a team that produced ventilators

and used 3D printing to manufacture face masks – all now deployed across the country.

Oman Technology Fund (OTF) has allocated \$2.6 million to support start-ups and develop ideas for short and long-term pandemic-related projects.

Based in the coastal town of Barka, one such start-up is Behar, which set up an app to help local fishermen overcome the challenge of closed markets and connect with customers.

Al Busaidi said that Ithraa will help promote OTF-funded start-ups and their products and services domestically and internationally. Ithraa is providing access to these Omani companies and others through its recently launched Invest In Oman portal.

While various types of government support have been put in place for businesses struggling with the impacts of the virus, grassroots initiatives have also sprung up – initiatives like @COVID-19preneurs, created by Muscat-based film company Booma.

"Indeed, entrepreneurs in South Africa and Jordan have been inspired by the platform and worked with Booma to launch it in their own countries," he said.

BLOOD DONATION CAMP EVOKES GOOD RESPONSE

STAFF REPORTER

SALALAH: The call to donate blood evoked good response from the community and corporate at a time when there is shortage of blood in the blood banks due to less number of donors and more demand from among the general and COVID-19 patients.

At a special blood donation campaign the employees of Crowne Plaza Salalah Resort donated 38 units of blood. For this, a blood donation

camp was organised inside the hotel premises in association with the Sultan Qaboos Hospital.

A total of 40 employees took part in the blood donation camp.

Manuel Levonian, General Manager of the resort, thanked both the staff members and the Sultan Qaboos Hospital for this generous cause.

"I am incredibly inspired by the support of our colleagues that came together to join the blood donation drive. This gesture shows how we help and care for others especially during the crisis time of the COVID-19

pandemic and also our commitment towards the IHG Corporate Social Responsibility."

Dr Mohammed Ahmed Morgan of Sultan Qaboos Hospital thanked the hotel for supporting the noble cause of blood donation and said, "This great initiative and partnership is very timely amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

This will aim to spread awareness among the community on the importance of blood donation and how a drop of blood donated can be instrumental in saving a life."

QUALITY FISH FOR BUYERS, FAIR PRICE FOR FISHERMEN



STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT: Local companies are making huge efforts to provide fisheries products to consumers at affordable prices amid coronavirus pandemic. Oman Fisheries Company is one of the companies which played a prominent role in ensuring supply of fish in the markets. It is the largest local company working in the area of fishing, processing and manufacturing of seafood products in the Sultanate of Oman.

Mohammed bin Salem bin Nasser al Ameri, Managing Director of Oman Fisheries Company, said: "Since the beginning of the crisis, the company, in direct coordination with the



Mohammed bin Salem bin Nasser al Ameri, Managing Director of Oman Fisheries Company

Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, used its resources to cover the deficit in local markets. By purchasing fish from the fishermen, it prevented them from being adversely affected particularly at the time of weak export. In addition to this, the company has signed several agreements

with hypermarkets to supply fresh fish daily which it purchases at fair prices from the fishermen. For example, more than 70 metric tonnes of fresh fish bought from the fishermen in the Wilayat of Daba was supplied in the market during the holy month of Ramadhan.

Al Ameri said that the company sells its products through Behar and Behar +, which are electronic platforms launched by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. The company also took the initiative to set up a marketing platform on WhatsApp for fish grill shops spread across all governorates of the Sultanate and which have Omani workers.



64 PROJECTS QUALIFY FOR UPGRADE PHASE 2

MUSCAT: The programme of transforming graduation projects to start-ups in the Information and Communication Technology sector (ICT) 'Upgrade' in its fourth edition has announced the qualification of 64 projects (with the participation of 164 students) to the second phase.

In the first phase of the fourth edition of the Upgrade programme 75 entries were presented by 19 academic institutions from inside the Sultanate and 1 participation from abroad.

It is worth noting that Upgrade, a programme designed for transforming outstanding graduation projects in the 4th Industrial Revolution technologies into successful ICT startups, in March announced the opening of registration for the fourth edition, 2020. The registration was opened to the academic institutions, students, researchers and innovators. The programme is in line with the increasing attention accorded to the 4th Industrial Revolution technologies. — ONA



Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care & Research Center

Extension Announcement for Auctions/Tender

The operational committee of Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care & Research Center announces extending the period of buying the following Tender / Auctions specifications:

- Laundry Services Tender No. (086 /2020). Tender Specification Fees are 100 OMR.
- Auction for Leasing Cafeteria (2 Nos) Auction No. (SQCCC/AUC/2 /2020).
 - Cafeteria in the ground floor measuring approximately 188.5 square meters.
 - Cafeteria in the first floor measuring approximately 191.50 square meters.

The Auction Specification Fees are 70 OMR for each.

- Auction for Leasing Flower shop. Auction No. (SQCCC/AUC/1 /2020). The Auction Specification Fees are 70 OMR.

Qualified companies interested in participating in this tender shall collect the Tender/Auction specification from the date of this advertisement until 5/07/2020 from the following address:

Operational Committee of Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care and Research Center
Knowledge Oasis, Building No4 (KOM4) First Floor.

Biddings that meet the above requirements should be submitted in a sealed envelope with a 1% tender bond valid for 90 days from date of submission by an employee from your company addressed to the head of Purchase Committee in the tender box located at:

Operational Committee of Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care and Research Center
Knowledge Oasis Building No4 (KOM4), First Floor.
No later than 12/07/2020.

Please note:

- Bids without a 1% valid tender bond will be disqualified.
- Bids received after the deadline indicated above, for whatever reason, will not be considered.
- For Queries you may Contact on Tel: 22584133 or 22584132. Or via email (purchase@ccrc.gov.om)
- The committee is not obliged to accept the lowest price of the bid or any other bid.



DIWAN OF ROYAL COURT
SUHAR MUNICIPALITY

Advertisement

Companies specialized in the field of this Bidding may obtain Bidding documents for the following Bidding, on any working day between 8:00 a.m. and 1:00 Noon, from **Quantity Surveying & Contracts Office, Suhar Municipality** on payment of non-refundable Bidding fee as noted below:

Bidding No.	Description of Work	Bidding Fee (non refundable)	Start Date for Selling Bidding	Last Date for Return
PRS/20/003	Bidding for Car sales Complex	R.O. 25	Sunday 21/06/2020	Tuesday 21/06/2020

Bidding Details:

- (11 No.) showrooms.
- Display area (about 1,000 square meters).
- In each Showroom (Office, Reception, Toilet, Kitchen and Parking).
- Public services (Service office, Public Toilets, Mosque, Security, Coffee Shop and Public Parking for Visitors along the Internal Street of the Showroom).

The **Form of Bidding** (in small envelope) under wax sealed cover shall be placed in the tender box location in our **Quantity Surveying & Contracts Office**, by **10.00 a.m** (Tell No. 26842322, Fax No. 26842070). All envelopes are to be clearly marked with the name of the Bidding being presented and no other marks.

The Providers bidding shall submit with Form of the Bidding (**Financial Offer**) a **Certified Cheque or Bidding Bond** in the sum of **2%** of the Bidding value valid for **90 days**, issued by a locally registered bank in the Sultanate of Oman. Biddings without such bond shall be rejected.

Comments:

- Suhar Municipality is not obliged to accept the highest or any tender it may received.

 www.sm.gov.om @Suhar_Mun Hotline: 80000007



Sultanate airports' passenger traffic reaches 3.57m

MUSCAT: The total number of passengers travelling through airports in the Sultanate (Muscat, Salalah, Sohar and Duqm) until the end of March 2020 reached 3.57 million.

Meanwhile, the number of flights landing and departing from Muscat, Salalah and Sohar international airports by the end of March 2020 reached 23,815, according to the latest data released by the National Centre for

Statistics and Information (NCSI). The total number of passengers at Muscat International Airport fell by 20 per cent to 3.20 million at the end of March 2020, over the same period of the previous year.

Meanwhile, the total number of flights at Muscat International Airport also fell by 14.9 per cent to 24,499 at the end of March 2020, from 28,775 for the same period of 2019.

The number of

international flights at Muscat International Airport was 22,317 during the first quarter month of 2020, falling 15.3 per cent over the same period of 2019. The total number of international passengers at the Muscat International Airport fell by 20.4 per cent at the end of March 2020, reaching 2.96 million passengers. This included 1.48 million passenger arrivals, 1.47 million passenger departures and

4,769 passenger transits.

Meanwhile, domestic flights at Muscat International Airport fell by 10.6 per cent to 2,182 flights at the end of March 2020, against 2,441 flights for the same period of 2019. The arrival and departure of domestic flights also dropped by 10.9 per cent and 10.3 per cent, respectively. The total number of domestic passengers at Muscat International Airport fell by 14.7 per cent to 237,206 at end of March 2020, against 278,052 for the same period of the previous year. This included 117,576 passenger arrivals and 119,630 passenger departures, the NCSI report showed.

According to the report, the total number of passengers at the Salalah Airport fell by 15.7 per cent to 289,329 at the end of March 2020, compared to 339,706 for the same period of 2019. The total number of flights at Salalah Airport fell by 15.9 per cent to 2,350 flights, compared to 2,794 flights in March 2019.

The total number of international flights at the Salalah Airport fell by 20.8 per cent to 964 flights until the end of March 2020, while the number of domestic flights fell by 12.1 per cent to 1,386 flights.

The total number of international passengers fell by 16.1 per cent to reach 113,858 passengers, while the number of domestic passengers also fell by 15.4 per cent to 172,471. — **ONA**

Pipeline work in Al Dakhiliyah from tomorrow

MUSCAT: The Public Authority for Water (Diam) will begin a two-day maintenance work on the main pipeline which feeds the Governorate of Al Dakhiliyah from 6 pm on Monday.

The operation involves replacement of some pumps and valves at the main pumping stations located in Seeb, Fanja and Samayil, besides mechanical and electrical work on the network feeding the wilayats of Bidbid, Samayil, Izki, Manah, Nizwa, Bahla,



Al Hamra and Adam.

The maintenance work is prompted by an expected surge in water consumption during summer. Diam

has planned to carry out improvement and maintenance works at the same time to enhance the water network performance and

reduce the time required for the operations.

As part of the preparations for the maintenance work, Diam operated a number of ground wells and filled the reservoirs to ensure uninterrupted supply of water. However, given the large area of the governorate, Diam has urged consumers to rationalise water consumption and make sure that the household tanks are filled to avoid water shortage during the maintenance operations.

US protesters topple Confederate statue after Juneteenth rallies



Protesters set fire to the toppled statue of Albert Pike during an event to mark Juneteenth, in Washington on Friday. — Reuters

WASHINGTON: Protesters in Washington toppled a statue of a Confederate general late on Friday, after nationwide rallies to demand racial justice on a day heavy with symbolism — the Juneteenth holiday commemorating the end of slavery in the United States.

Demonstrations were held in Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York and Washington against a backdrop of weeks of protests fuelled by the deaths of African Americans at the hands of police.

In a stark illustration of the tensions roiling the nation, President Donald Trump issued a solemn White House statement commemorating Juneteenth, while also threatening protesters on Twitter ahead of his controversial rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma on Saturday.

Juneteenth marks the day — June 19, 1865



The DC police are not doing their job as they watch a statue be ripped down & burn. These people should be immediately arrested.

DONALD TRUMP,
US PRESIDENT

—when a Union general arrived in Galveston, Texas and informed slaves that they were free — two months after the Civil War had ended and two-and-a-half years after president Abraham Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

The date is generally celebrated with prayer services and family gatherings, but comes

this year amid a national soul-searching over America's legacy of racial injustice.

The United States has been gripped by daily "Black Lives Matter" protests since the May 25 death of George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man killed by a white police officer in Minnesota.

Late on Friday a statue of Confederate general Albert Pike was torn down by demonstrators in the capital and set on fire, in an act labelled a "disgrace" by Trump.

"The DC police are not doing their job as they watch a statue be ripped down & burn. These people should be immediately arrested," Trump tweeted.

Earlier, several thousand demonstrators marched across New York's Brooklyn Bridge to Manhattan, chanting the names of black men and women killed by police in recent years. — AFP

IN BRIEF

PROSECUTOR WHO PROBED TRUMP ALLIES REFUSES TO QUIT

NEW YORK: A US prosecutor who investigated allies of President Donald Trump insisted on Friday he had no intention of quitting after the attorney general issued a press release announcing his resignation.

Geoffrey Berman oversaw the prosecution of former Trump lawyer Michael Cohen and probed adviser Rudy Giuliani's efforts to discredit the president's political opponents since he was appointed to head the powerful Southern District of New York attorney's office in 2018. — AFP

TRIPOLI GOVT TO BOYCOTT LEAGUE TALKS

TRIPOLI: Libya's UN-recognised unity government has said it will boycott talks on the conflict in the North African country to be held by Arab League foreign ministers next week.

Foreign Minister Mohamad Taher Siala told the bloc's executive council on Friday that the planned meeting would "merely deepen the rift" between Arab governments on the conflict, his ministry said.

The talks, to be held by videoconference because of concerns about coronavirus, were called for by Egypt, a key supporter of the Tripoli government's arch foe, eastern-based strongman Khalifa Haftar. — AFP

YEMENI GROUP SEIZES KEY CITY FROM GOVT

SANAA: Yemen's southern separatists on Saturday captured a major city in the province of Socotra Archipelago, a Unesco World Heritage site, from a Saudi-backed government, a local official said.

Loyalists of the self-styled Southern Transitional Council (STC), which seeks independence for southern Yemen from the north, took control of all government facilities in Hadiboh, the capital city of Socotra, after fighting against government forces there, the local council official added.

— dpa

WORLD

WHO warns of virus danger as Brazil cases hit one million

RIO DE JANEIRO: The World Health Organization warned of a “new and dangerous phase” of the coronavirus pandemic, as infections continued to surge in the Americas, with Brazil registering more than one million cases.

Colombia and Mexico also passed bleak milestones, as their death tolls topped 2,000 and 20,000, respectively, showing how the virus continues ravaging the Americas and parts of Asia even as Europe starts to ease out of lockdown.

The measures imposed to halt the spread of the disease have caused crippling economic damage, but the WHO warned against giving in to isolation fatigue.

“The world is in a new and dangerous phase. Many people are understandably fed up with being at home... but the virus is still spreading fast,” WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a virtual press conference.

The virus has now killed more than 458,000 people and infected 8.6 million worldwide.

A vaccine remains months off at best despite several trials, and scientists are still making daily discoveries about the virus, its symptoms and the extent to which



it may have spread before being identified.

Brazil, which has the second-highest number of infections and deaths after the United States, reported a one-day record of nearly 55,000 new infections, becoming the second country to pass one million cases.

The health ministry said the jump was caused by “instability” in its reporting system, which delayed previous days’ figures for some states. Brazil’s death toll now stands at nearly 49,000, and has risen by

more than 1,000 each of the past four days — though its curve finally appears to be starting to flatten.

Authorities in Mexico City meanwhile pushed back a planned reopening of the economy from next week to the following, saying the rate of infection was still too high.

And Argentina, which is reeling from the economic impact of the health crisis, bought more time to negotiate its \$66 billion debt restructuring with creditors, who agreed to extend the deadline once again, to

July 24.

In Europe, researchers in Italy said they had found evidence the virus was present there in December, months before its first confirmed cases and about the same time the disease was first reported in China.

Researchers discovered genetic traces of SARS-CoV-2 — as the virus is officially known — in samples of waste water collected in Milan and Turin at the end of last year, and Bologna in January, the ISS institute said. — **AFP**

Brazil ex-health chief says ministry ‘lost credibility’

SAO PAULO: As Brazil’s coronavirus outbreak started to turn ugly, then-health minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta calmly but firmly hewed to science and international best practice, preparing the country for an inevitable lockdown. He soon found himself out of a job. President Jair Bolsonaro fired the 55-year-old doctor in April, after repeatedly clashing with him over what the far-right leader called the “hysteria” of the virus response. Brazil has since become the country with the second-highest number of infections and deaths worldwide, after the United States.

Pakistan announces resumption of international flights

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan on Saturday resumed international flight operations in the country, after months of a suspension imposed to prevent further spread of the coronavirus. The government “is pleased to authorise international flight operations to and from Pakistan from all international airports from June 20,” Abdul Sattar Khokhar, spokesperson for the Civil Aviation Authority, said in a statement late on Friday. The permissions may be subject to restrictions from time to time based on the evolving COVID-19 scenario and implementation of health protocols.

US sees 705 more virus deaths in 24 hours

WASHINGTON: The United States lost another 705 people to the new coronavirus in the 24 hours leading up to 8:30 pm on Friday (0030 GMT Saturday), according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University. It marked the ninth day in which the daily toll from the virus has been fewer than 1,000, even as the US remains the country hardest-hit by the pandemic with 119,086 deaths out of 2,219,119 official cases. Some 20 states have seen a rebound in infections as the epicenter of the country’s outbreak has moved from New York and the country’s Northeast to the South and West. — **Agencies**



In Trump versus Trump, the winner is Joe Biden

JANET HOOK AND EVAN HALPER

As President Donald Trump skids in the polls, Joe Biden has amassed a lead in so many battleground states that he is competing in places once considered out of reach, narrowing the president's path to reelection. But for all Biden's good fortune, there is a catch: Voters are not so much upbeat about him as they are upset with Trump. Many, in fact, don't know much about the prospective Democratic nominee, despite his decades in high office, and some Democrats warn that Biden shouldn't rely too heavily on Trump's self-destructiveness to keep propelling him forward. "The biggest challenge is filling in Joe Biden," said Robert Gibbs, a former adviser to President Obama. "People know he was the vice-president, but not a lot else." It is a concern broadly shared among Democratic operatives, even as earlier doubts about Bi-

den have melted away. His once-anaemic campaign war chest is bulging as money floods in, and states including Georgia and Texas that long seemed out of reach are suddenly on the battle map. Weaknesses in the campaign's infrastructure - such as a lackluster social media operation - have been addressed, and Biden is more sure-footed on the virtual campaign trail. But his lead has undeniably been driven more by anti-Trump animus than anything Biden has done. A CNN poll this month that had Biden ahead by 55 per cent to 41 per cent found that 3 out of 5 Biden voters said they were casting their ballot against Trump; just 37 per cent said it would be a pro-Biden vote. Biden insists he will not run as just an anti-Trump candidate, and has promised to detail a New Deal-style economic agenda. For now, however, the campaign has seemed eager to keep the spotlight on the president's many unforced errors. — dpa

Are we just pawns in a global 'shell' game?



RAY PETERSEN
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Fossil fuel, says the Oxford dictionary, is "a natural fuel such as coal or gas, formed in the geological past from the remains of living organisms," while renewable energy is, "energy from a source that is not depleted when used, such as wind or solar power," making them significantly different. Currently there is a greater awareness of the commercial appeal of renewables, given technological advances that can maximise the management and storage of the 'harvest' from renewable sources, and the prospect of greater emphasis on solar and wind energy generation within the Sultanate has been clearly signposted with the recent rebranding of Petroleum Development Oman as Energy Development Oman. Interestingly, the Australian Business Group is hosting a webinar this week on "Bringing Renewable Energy to Oman," with some 'big-hitters' on the local business scene, Brian Wood, Gilein Steensma and Ayman al Shukaili featuring on their panel of experts. It will be interesting perhaps to understand how the energy sector genuinely sees the renewables. Do they see them

as replacing, or complementing, oil and gas over the next fifty to a hundred years? From my perspective there are key questions yet to be answered, and not aimed at any specific people, but maybe points to ponder, is a more accurate description? If shale oil production, and increased 'fracking,' are at the heart of America's oil production resurgence, why do the environmentalists not appear to care? They have certainly been, shall we say, 'restrained' in their opposition. Much of the world is still not significantly 'developed', in terms of infrastructure and environmental responsibility, looking at Asia, South East Asia, much of South America and Africa. Surely, as they continue to develop, there will still be a market for Oman's oil? And just to finish, it all sounds like a bit of a 'shell game' (no pun intended) where the unsuspecting dupe can never win. Coronavirus arrived, magnifying the effect of the global oil crisis, with China, as Oman's most ardent customer, also the greatest beneficiary of plummeting prices. Whether it is the ultimate irony, or coincidence, a cynical view is that we will never know...

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this page are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the opinion of the *Observer*.

OMINVEST Group Chairman's Interview



Khalid Al Zubair

OAB Merger With Alizz on Track

Consolidation in the Omani banking sector is a crucial need of the hour so that the sector could grow and stay competitive. Yet, we have not witnessed much progress to date on a wider scale. Despite challenging business and economic conditions, when we normally experience difficulties in completing large merger transactions, it is encouraging to see that the proposed merger between Oman Arab Bank (OAB) and Alizz Islamic Bank (Alizz) has been progressing remarkably well.

To find out what are the key enablers for this important merger and to discuss wide ranging issues, we caught up with Mr. Khalid Al Zubair, Chairman of OMINVEST Group (the majority shareholder of OAB). In particular, we sought the Chairman's views on the progress being made on the proposed merger; planned structure of the merged Bank and its future prospects; implications for the Omani banking sector and the broader economy, and the potential value creation for all the stakeholders.

Here are excerpts of our conversation:

Mr. Chairman – we welcome you to the discussion. Please share your thoughts on the key factors that have contributed to the merger transaction's successful progression.

For such a strategic transaction – critical to the health of Omani banking sector and our economy – the vision, commitment and crucial support for the transaction have emanated from the leadership of the Key Stakeholders and our esteemed Regulatory Institutions.

On behalf of OMINVEST's Board, I would like to state that we cannot thank enough the leadership at the CBO and the CMA – not only did they give invaluable advice but also provided exceptional support. I must add that our Regulators' approach has been admirably pragmatic given the extremely difficult business and economic conditions we all are facing. Simply put – their thought process and actions have been ahead of the curve.

We sincerely appreciate the support and commitment of Arab Bank plc, our long-standing strategic partner in OAB. Likewise, the Chairmen of OAB and Alizz, their Boards and the Top Management have been extremely thoughtful and proactive in seizing such an opportunity to preserve and create more value for their shareholders, customers, and employees. We are grateful to them all for extending gracious cooperation and demonstrating a true spirit of partnership.

Thank you Mr. Chairman for your insights. Can you please also elaborate on the future structure of the Merged Bank and when you expect the Merger to be concluded?

After careful thought and discussions amongst the leaderships of OAB, Alizz and our esteemed Regulators, we all have agreed that after the Merger, OAB will become the parent entity and transform into an SAOG as a public listed entity in MSM, while, Alizz will become a wholly owned Islamic subsidiary of OAB and transform into an SAOC.

Here, I would like to highlight that as per the agreement between the key shareholders and support and advice of the Regulators, OAB will inject capital to restore the capital-base of Alizz (the proposed Islamic Subsidiary) and together transfer OAB's Islamic window (Al Yusr) to Alizz to strengthen and scale-up its Islamic Banking business. In terms of the merger's timeline, we believe that subject to the shareholders' and all the regulatory

approvals, the merger is expected to be finalized by the end of June 2020.

We just saw a Market Disclosure from OMINVEST regarding the sale of its stake in OAB to Arab Bank plc – kindly explain the motives behind sale of the stake, its impact on the future shareholding structure of the Merged Bank and role of the major shareholders?

I would like to emphasize that it is important for key stakeholders and the general investors to fully understand the rationale behind the sale of OMINVEST's stake in OAB to Arab Bank plc. In order to facilitate the merger transaction and to be respectful of our long-standing partner's strategic interests, OMINVEST decided to dilute its share in OAB to facilitate for Arab Bank plc to maintain its 49% stake in OAB. This will allow Arab Bank plc to gain control, contribute more capital, transfer technology and add value to the business. OMINVEST will sell 11.76% stake in OAB to Arab Bank plc at a valuation of 1.3x the Book Value as of 31st March 2020. We believe that such a control premium for a significant stake is justified given OAB's growth prospects ahead.

We are cognizant that the sale of the stake will also cause immediate loss of sizeable earnings for OMINVEST that it used to accrue from OAB. However, we are confident that OMINVEST will be able to deploy the proceeds from the sale to other high-quality investments to fill the earnings gap and further diversify our portfolio. Given our strong liquidity position, we are actively looking at new acquisitions.

After the sale of the stake to Arab Bank plc and the merger's completion, OMINVEST's stake in OAB will decline to 31.64%. Consequently, OMINVEST will reclassify OAB as an Associate and become a Strategic Financial Partner providing support in the areas of corporate governance, shareholder alignment, coordination with the Regulators and business development in the local market. On the other hand, Arab Bank plc will account for OAB as its Subsidiary and play the role of a Strategic Operating Partner, providing technical support to OAB and Alizz after the Merger.

As part of the rebalancing in the shareholding structure due to the merger transaction, OMINVEST and Arab Bank plc will also set up a joint Trust Account to enable certain Islamic Sharia compliant institutional shareholders and retail investors (up to a max of 25% of Alizz shareholding) to sell at the Book Value, which is at significant premium to the prevailing market price of Alizz.

In addition to your role as the Chairman of OMINVEST Group, you are also a prominent business leader in Oman and thus understand the sentiment of foreign investors. It would be great to have your thoughts on why you think Arab Bank plc is committing more capital and resources to OAB and providing crucial support to this Merger transaction? Does this signify foreign investors' confidence in Oman's economy?

As we all know that over the last three decades, Arab Bank plc, the co-founding shareholder of OAB, has demonstrated strong commitment to our banking sector and the economy. Given its substantially large balance sheet of over \$50bn and extensive regional and int'l presence, Arab Bank plc brings enormous value to our country in terms of capital and technical know-how in conventional

and Islamic banking. Given our mutual support and trust built over the years, the leadership at Arab Bank plc has reiterated its strong intentions to further commit significant investment in our banking sector at a time when we are in acute need to attract long-term foreign capital with operational expertise that can add substantial value. It simply underscores Arab Bank plc's confidence in Omani banking sector, our economy, and systems.

Since OMINVEST is the majority shareholder in OAB, how do you see OAB benefiting from this Merger and what are your future expectations from OAB, as a key shareholder?

OMINVEST and Arab Bank plc have made substantial new commitments to OAB in terms of capital and resources. Importantly, we are appreciative of our esteemed Regulators that following the merger we will have two separate banking licences. We believe that OAB will emerge as a bigger and stronger player in the sector – it will have deeper and wider access to the interbank market, higher money-market limits and expand aggressively in the areas of trade finance, fee-based activities and treasury. On a consolidated basis, OAB's balance sheet, capital adequacy ratio, capital structure, and liquidity position will get a major boost. While Alizz will be OAB's wholly owned subsidiary, it will have its own Management and Board and will function as a truly independent Islamic Banking platform. In addition, Alizz will benefit from Arab Bank plc's successful experience in Islamic Banking in other countries. We expect that Alizz could potentially aim for an IPO or explore other strategic options in a few years.

The merger will bring significant synergies and cross-selling opportunities as OAB and Alizz will be able to operate across platforms, mutually share human and financial capital and offer a wider array of service and products to their customers. From a strategic positioning standpoint, OAB will be able to play a key role in the future consolidation of the sector, which is inevitable. We believe that OAB will be in a position to support Oman's economy on a bigger scale and create more jobs for Omani nationals.

Thank you Mr. Chairman for your insights on OAB. Could you please also share your views on how this merger will benefit Alizz stakeholders and how it will impact Alizz's future prospects?

We are grateful to the Chairman of Alizz, its Board and the Management for recognizing early on how important this merger is for their shareholders and for Alizz's future growth prospects. We acknowledge that they have been tremendously supportive to make the merger happen. We all appreciate the fact that Alizz is a key player in the fast-growing Islamic banking market and has strong prospects ahead. We are pleased that Alizz is going to merge with OAB, which has a long history and track record of performance. In addition, we find that there is a great chemistry between the major shareholders and leadership of the two banks. In terms of the future prospects, we expect great value and strategic support coming from the major shareholders of Alizz and OAB. We believe that Alizz will be strongly capitalized and will be able to scale-up its market share in the Islamic banking after the merger.

Mr. Khalid Al Zubair – we sincerely thank you for sharing your thoughts on this important merger between OAB and Alizz and look forward to hearing more from you as the transaction progresses towards its conclusion.

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BP TO RAMP UP BLOCK 61 GAS OUTPUT BY YEAR-END

MUSCAT: BP Oman has announced that it plans to start producing 500 million cubic feet per day of natural gas from its Ghazeer development in Block 61 before the end of this year, effectively ramping up output from the block to 1.5 billion cubic feet (bcf) per day.

Yousuf al Ojaili, Country Oman President, said construction work on the Ghazeer development – representing the second phase of the energy major’s investment in Block 61 – will be about 99 per cent complete by year’s end.

In a statement to Oman News Agency (ONA), Al Ojaili said the Block is currently producing 1 bcf/day of natural gas and around 35,000 barrels per day (bpd) of condensate.

Production of conden-



sate is expected to double when Ghazeer is fully operational, he noted.

Drilling of production wells is ongoing with 126 of a total of 300 wells planned over the 15-year life of the project having been drilled to date as part of the Phase 1 Khazzan and Phase 2

Ghazeer developments.

Investments made thus far in harnessing the tight gas potential of the Khazzan and Ghazeer fields aggregate \$9.3 billion out of a total commitment of \$16 billion planned during the life of the project.

BP Oman has plans to

NEW MILESTONE:

Investments made thus far in harnessing the tight gas potential of the Khazzan and Ghazeer fields aggregate \$9.3 billion out of a total commitment of \$16 billion planned during the life of the project.

develop about 10.5 trillion cubic feet (TCF) of gas reserves from the Block, which will contribute to meeting domestic demand.

BP is the operator of Block 61 with a 60 per cent stake, while the remainder is held by OQ (30 per cent) and Petronas (10 per cent).

OMAN MAKES HEADWAY WITH \$430M ALGAE FARM PROJECT



CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT: Oman hopes to make a landmark foray into the multibillion dollar global algae farming industry with a maiden investment in a mega project on the South Al Sharqiya coast with key backing from a leading British player.

UK-based SuSeWi (formerly Feed Algae), which is behind a number of algae farming projects around the world, is leading the development of

a 100,000-tons per annum capacity farm in the Sultanate. With an estimated investment of around \$430 million, it will rank among the largest micro algae farming projects in the world.

Given the scope of the venture and the need for approvals from a plethora of regulatory agencies, the Implementation Support and Follow-Up Unit (ISFU) – a special task force set up under the auspices of the Diwan of Royal Court – has been facilitating the approvals process to aid its speedy delivery. ISFU’s mandate is to fast-track projects and initiatives that will help accelerate Oman’s economic diversification.

Significantly, the proposed venture will help Oman break into an industry that will be worth an estimated \$45 billion in 2023, according to ISFU. The Sultanate’s unique natural environment and climate settings are

ideal for algae farming, it noted in its newly published 2019 Annual Report.

“Algae is a fast-growing plant organism with many beneficial properties. It converts sunlight, CO₂, and nutrients into organic matter that can replace many commonly used oils and animal and plant proteins. It is also an effective carbon sink, water nutrient filter, and an efficient land/water source of food and fuel energy.

In addition, algae has various applications in the biofuel, bioplastics, fertiliser, pharmaceutical, cosmetic, and nutritional supplement industries, as well as in animal and fish feed production. Moreover, as it contains a high percentage of protein and omega-3 fatty acids. Algae oil, for example, is an ideal alternative to the increasingly scarce and expensive fish oil, and in high demand in the aquaculture industry,” it explained.

PANDEMIC HALVES FUEL CONSUMPTION IN OMAN

CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT: The uptake of motor fuels across the Sultanate plummeted by almost 50 per cent during the second quarter of this year, as pandemic containment measures, including limited lockdowns, work-from-home practices, and the large-scale shuttering of many retail businesses, had a large-scale impact on road transportation, according to key officials representing the fuel marketing industry.

The slump in retail fuel demand was one of the dominant takeaways from a webinar hosted by The Business Year last week on the theme, 'Fuel Retail Business: Challenges and Lessons Learned'. The panellists comprised David Kalife, CEO – Oman Oil Marketing Company (OOMCO); Eng Hamed bin Salim al Maghdri, CEO – Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing; and Abdulrahman al Yahyaei, CEO – Oman Society for Petroleum Services (OPAL).

OOMCO's Kalife said the impact has been "dramatic" not only for the company's core retail and commercial fuel business segments, but also for its non-fuel activities encompassing its network of convenience stores, restaurant outlets and other services.

As a result of the pandemic, the decline in revenues from motor fuel sales was around 20 per cent in March, rising to around 50 per cent in April and May, said Kalife. In June, with a modest pick-up in economic activities following the easing of lockdown measures, there has been a slight improvement in fuel consumption, although the

Fuel Retail Business: CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNED

Presented by thebusinessyear

Panellist

David Kalife

CEO, Oman Oil Marketing Company (OOMCO)

Panellist

Abdulrahman Al Yahyaei

CEO, Oman Society for Petroleum Services (OPAL)

Panellist

Hamed bin Salim bin Hamed Al Maghdri

CEO, Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing

Moderator

Gabriele de Leva

Country Editor Oman, The Business Year

Welcome remarks from

Elena Barrova Peraz

Country Director Oman, The Business Year

The Business Year Events



Hamed bin Salim bin Hamed Al Ma...



Gabriele de Leva



David Kalife



Abdulrahman Al Yahyaei

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As a result of the pandemic, the decline in revenues from motor fuel sales was around 20 per cent in March, rising to around 50 per cent in April and May.

DAVID KHALIFE, CEO, OOMCO

MAJOR SLUMP:

Impacts of COVID-19 and weak oil prices to weigh on retail fuel business for another 18 months, says top industry executive.

month is expected to end with a 45 per cent decline compared to corresponding figures for last year, he noted.

Significantly, the effects of the pandemic and weak oil prices have also been felt in the commercial segments of the fuel marketing business, Kalife explained. As a result of the cut in oil production agreed by Oman in support of a global output cut, fuel consumption by rigs and oilfield operators has declined by around 10 per cent. Uptake by companies engaged in construction and infrastructure has slumped as well, he

said. Regardless of an improvement in the overall COVID-19 situation, the impacts of the current pandemic are likely to linger for at least another 18 months, warned Kalife. "Even if there is no second wave, the impact will last through 2021. The best estimate is that we should see growth (comparable with) 2019 levels in September 2021, although some are talking about January 2022. So it means that we will stay in negative territory for the coming one and half years." Changes in consumer behaviour will also weigh on fuel consumption in coming years, according to the CEO. Concerns over the use of fossil fuels for the health of the planet may encourage many people to drive less, work from home more, and

generally reduce their consumption of motor fuels. Cost-cutting may be another contributory factor, he pointed. The only silver lining from the crisis, said Kalife, was the drop in prices of fuel at the pump – a benefit accruing to customers, but not to marketing companies, he said. Eng Hamed al Maghdri of Al Maha Petroleum said the decline in retail fuel sales averaged around 45 per cent during the pandemic, although a slight improvement was evident in recent weeks. However, demand for jet fuel – a key business stream for the company – was down to "almost zero" as civilian airplanes remain grounded, with the exception of small numbers of cargo planes and limited passenger flights.

SAMAYIL INDUSTRIAL CITY PULLS IN NEW INVESTMENT



MUSCAT: Despite the economic fluctuations caused by coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic worldwide, Samayil Industrial City is witnessing increasing investment demand from business owners and investors, says Eng Dawood bin Salim al Hadabi (pictured), Director General of Samayil Industrial City.

During the first half of 2020, the number of investment applications for industrial, service and commercial projects has reached 19. Of these applications, seven have already been localised and the rest are



under study and evaluation before getting localised. This brings the total number of signed contracts in Samayil Industrial City to more than 155. The total investment volume has exceeded RO 85 million, which is expected to reach RO 125 million after the

completion of projects. Al Hadabi commented, "This growing demand is attributed to the ideal investment environment presented by Samayil Industrial City to the investors, which is supported by a package of incentives and facilities such as exemption

from customs duties and taxes on production inputs, lease period for up to 30 years and renewable for the same period, and participation in internal and external Omani Products Exhibitions as part of 'Made in Oman' campaign, among other incentives."

Oman Technology Fund invests in 'Distance Learning Centre'

MUSCAT: Oman Technology Fund (OTF) has announced an investment in the Distance Learning Centre, which is a smart educational platform called 'SANA Electronic Platform'.

SANA harnesses the scientific and technical capabilities of Information Technology to support e-learning and distance education and thereby serving the needs of higher education institutions inside and outside the Sultanate. OTF's support for the platform is part of its RO 1 million in funding assistance to initiatives that overcome the challenges posed by the coronavirus.

The SANA platform features an integrated system for managing e-learning and distance education and



producing digital courses. This platform aims to help various educational institutions in providing integrated interactive education in the form of recorded lectures, virtual meetings, class activities and elec-

tronic tests compatible with academic quality standards. Zeyad bin Talib al Maawali, General Supervisor, said: The platform is the result of a partnership between the Endowment Fund for Distance Education of the

Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs and OTF. The Distance Education Centre is the first institution to offer elearning services in the Sultanate since 2013.

Nearly 5,000 students have registered for various programmes, and around 2,600 students have graduated so far.

Systems applied at the Centre are designed by local Omani experts. Maha al Baloushi, Executive Director of the Wadi Accelerator Programme at OTF, said: "The SANA electronic platform enables students to register for specific courses or full programmes – a service that will enhance technical and vocational education in the Sultanate".

BUSINESS



A person holds Russian rouble notes in St Petersburg. — Reuters

Russia's central bank cuts key rate to historic low

MOSCOW: Russia's central bank a 1.0 percentage-point cut to its key interest rate, taking it to 4.5 per cent, the lowest level in decades, in a bid to revive the economy after a virus shut-down.

A global slump in demand during months of lockdown measures triggered by the coronavirus epidemic led to "more profound than expected" disinflationary factors, the bank said in a statement. The bank has abided by a conservative monetary policy for years, targeting four per cent inflation, but said on Friday that the rate decision was taken because this figure may dip "significantly" below the target next year.

It said the negative effect of the economic lockdown has been "more extended" than previously assumed, hitting investment and incomes and increasing unemployment.

"The influence of the weaker rouble and the episodes of increased demand for certain product groups in March has been exhausted", it said.

It said further cuts would be considered, based on inflation dynamics, economic activity and domestic and global market risks.

The next bank meeting on monetary policy is scheduled for July 24.

Russia's State Statistics Agency on Friday published figures showing employment grew to 6.1 per cent in May, steadily growing from 5.8 per cent and 4.7 per cent in April and March, respectively.

Consumer spending fell by 19.2 in May year on year, figures showed,

The negative effect of the economic lockdown has been 'more extended' than previously assumed, hitting investment and incomes and increasing unemployment



Workers weld a body shell at an Avtovaz factory southeast of Moscow. — AFP

though rose from even lower levels in April of this year by 6.7 per cent.

President Vladimir Putin declared a "non-working" period from late March, but on May 12 lifted the national lockdown, saying regions were free to impose rules based on local stages of the epidemic.

Some sectors of economy were opened up, though many remain crip-

pled by the restrictions.

The central bank predicted that the contraction of the economy in the second quarter "could prove more sizeable than expected", after growth of 1.6 per cent in the first quarter.

It predicted the GDP for the year 2020 would shrink by four to six per cent, and a return to pre-coronavirus levels of economic growth only in 2022.

Central bank chief Elvira Nabiullina said she also expected the recovery to take longer than previously forecast, notably due to oil production cuts at least until the end of July that Moscow has agreed with the Opec cartel.

The new key rate is the lowest in recent history, below the previous record of five per cent in June 2010.

"This is quite a change relative to previous 5 years of quite conservative monetary policy", said Renaissance Capital's chief economist Sofiya Donets. "So it could clearly affect both borrowing and savings in the economy", she told AFP, adding she expects a return to a more neutral policy next year. "The rate of 5 per cent or below would indeed be the lowest over this century", said Dmitry Polevoy, chief economist at the Russian Direct Investment Fund.

"With downside risks to inflation outlook, strong ruble and recessionary economic environment there is clearly room to enter this uncharted territory of lower policy rate to fuel the just-started economic recovery" he said. — AFP

US OPEN ORGANISERS RETHINKING DECISION ON WHEELCHAIR EVENT

NEW YORK: The organisers of the US Open said on Friday they could have better communicated with wheelchair athletes before announcing they would not be part of this year's scaled-down event in New York and are now rethinking their decision.

The United States Tennis Association (USTA) held a call on Friday with wheelchair tennis leadership during which they stated they should have worked in a "collaborative manner" with wheelchair athletes when developing the plan for the US Open.

"The USTA also committed to working with the players and the ITF (International Tennis Federation) to explore a number of potential scenarios for the wheelchair competition," the governing body for the sport in

the US said in a statement.

"The USTA expects to gather player feedback on their perspective and work with the ITF to finalise an approach to the 2020 US Open Wheelchair Competition."

Australian Paralympic tennis champion Dylan Alcott led a chorus of backlash after plans revealed on Wednesday for this year's US Open did not include a wheelchair competition, one of several changes to help stem the spread of COVID-19.

The other changes announced for the August 31-September 13 US Open are no singles qualifying for able-bodied players, the elimination of mixed doubles and junior competitions and smaller fields for men's and women's doubles.

— Reuters

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The USTA also committed to working with the players and the ITF (International Tennis Federation) to explore a number of potential scenarios for the wheelchair competition.

USTA STATEMENT



SPORTS



‘RYDER CUP WITHOUT FANS WOULD BE A DISASTER’

FOR ME IT WOULD BE AN ABSOLUTE DISASTER. IT’S ALL ABOUT THE FANS, THE ATMOSPHERE, BEING THERE. I CAN UNDERSTAND THE CORPORATE SIDE OF IT AND TELEVISION BUT YOU HAVE TO REMEMBER THE PLAYERS ARE PLAYING FOR NOTHING AND IT’S ALL ABOUT THE PLAYERS REALLY. EVERYONE WANTS TO BE THERE

IAN WOOSNAM
FORMER EUROPE CAPTAIN

LONDON: Holding this year's Ryder Cup without spectators would be an "absolute disaster" according to former Europe player and captain Ian Woosnam. The biennial event is scheduled to take place from September 25-27 at Whistling Straits in Wisconsin but fans will almost certainly be asked not to attend because of the COVID-19 pandemic that has played havoc with the golf calendar. "For me it would be an absolute disaster," Woosnam, who played in eight consecutive Ryder Cups and captained the team to victory in 2006, told a 'Ryder Cup at Home Social' on Friday alongside former European players Peter

Baker and Paul Lawrie. "It's all about the fans, the atmosphere, being there. I can understand the corporate side of it and television but you have to remember the players are playing for nothing and it's all about the players really. Everyone wants to be there." Baker played in just one Ryder Cup, in 1993, and believes not having the experience of the huge, partisan crowds would be a shame. "That's such a big part of it," he said. "I know it's great to see live golf on the TV. Hopefully they can sort something out so they can play it the following year, which I know is really difficult. Or they can get some fans in this time."

Former Open champion Lawrie said finances could dictate that it goes ahead without fans. "It would be a shame because having experienced it, it's an amazing atmosphere. It's so loud you can't even hear your caddie speaking to you. I think they are getting close to having to make a decision." Reports have said the PGA of America and the European Tour will decide this month if the event will go ahead. World number one Rory McIlroy has said he thought the event is unlikely to take place this year and that postponing it would be the right call. More than 121,000 people have died in the United States due to COVID-19. — Reuters



SIMPSON GRABS LEAD, WATNEY EXITS WITH COVID-19

SOUTH CAROLINA, US: Webb Simpson delivered a putting master class to grab the lead and Nick Watney withdrew after testing positive for COVID-19 at the second round of the RBC Heritage in South Carolina on Friday.

Former US Open champion Simpson mixed nine birdies with three bogeys for a six-under-par 65 that left him at 12 under for the week at Harbour Town course on Hilton Head Island and one shot clear of Bryson DeChambeau (64) and Canadian Corey Connors (63).

“I had a few par savers that kind of kept my momentum going, but I did drop three shots, all kinds of physical errors,” said world No 9 Simpson. “I’m thinking well right now, so I’d rather have physical errors than mental errors.”

The brilliant play of the leaders, who went out in the morning wave when scoring conditions were ideal before inclement weather forced a brief halt to play in the afternoon, took a back seat to the news of Watney’s positive test.

Watney said he felt symptoms of the disease when he arrived at the



I had a few par savers that kind of kept my momentum going, but I did drop three shots, all kinds of physical errors. I’m thinking well right now, so I’d rather have physical errors than mental errors.

WEBB SIMPSON,
WORLD NO 9

course and got his positive result before starting his second round. He played his first round on Thursday alongside fellow Americans Vaughn Taylor and Luke List. The result makes Watney the first golfer inside the PGA Tour’s “bubble” to test positive for the disease since it returned from a three-month hiatus last week in Fort Worth, Texas, where Watney also competed.

Vaughn, who will be tested again as part of the PGA Tour’s protocol, learned about Watney’s positive test midway through his second round. — **Reuters**

SPORTS

AUSTRALIA READY FOR A WOMAN TO RUN THE GAME: PERRY

MELBOURNE:

Australian cricket is ripe for a woman to run the board for the first time and has excellent candidates within easy reach, according to star all-rounder Ellyse Perry.

Cricket Australia (CA) have appointed Nick Hockley as interim CEO to replace Kevin Roberts, who resigned this week after months of criticism over his leadership, but the board will conduct a global search for a permanent boss.

Perry suggested recruiters need only look as far as Western Australia Cricket Association boss Christina Matthews, or at senior women in head office, for a long-term solution.

"I think Cricket Australia has been ready for a female CEO for a long time," Perry told reporters in a video call on Friday.

"I know Chris (Matthews) was in discussions for the last round of hiring for the role. "I don't think it's something that's new.

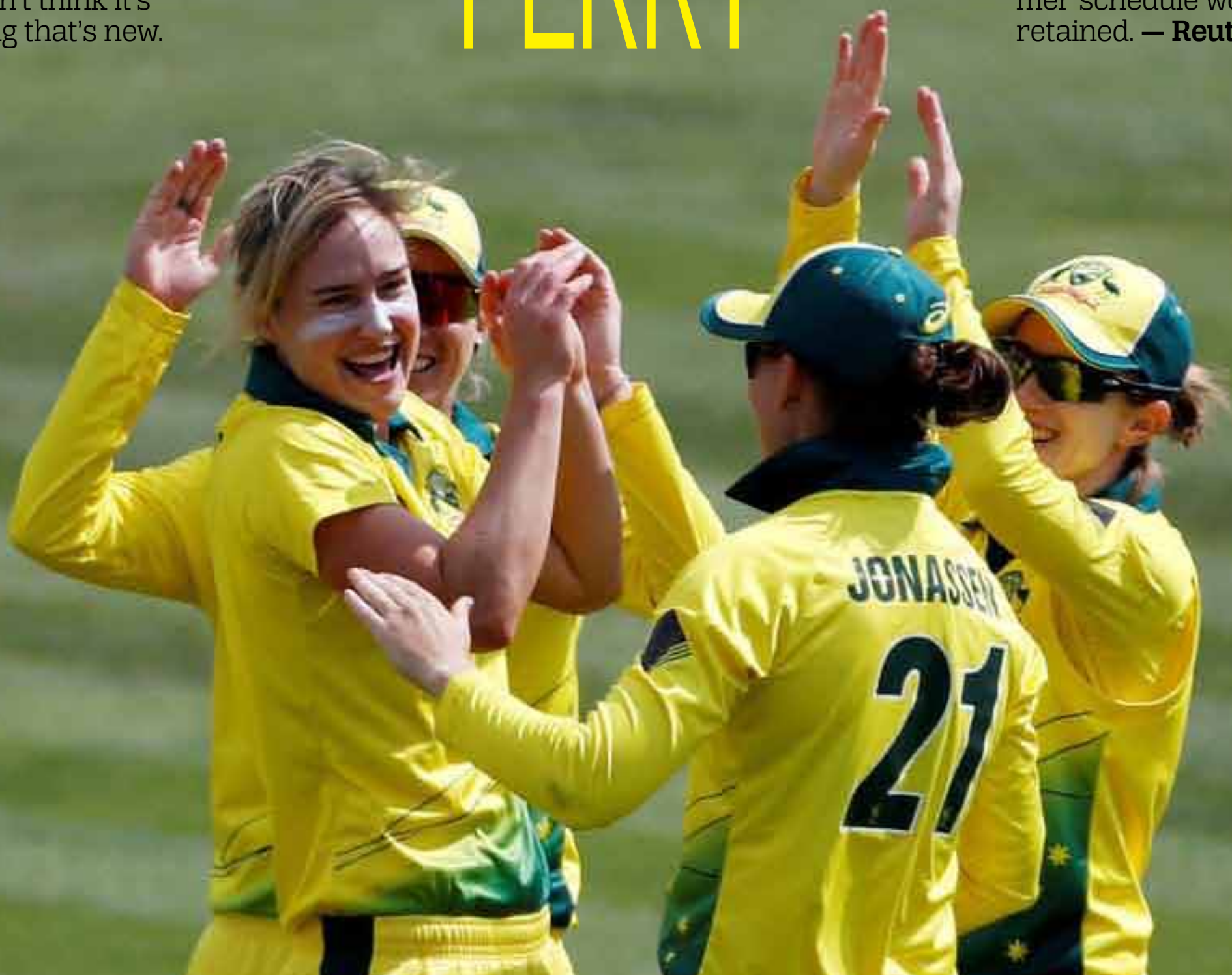
"We've got a number of women working in high executive roles in Cricket Australia, Belinda Clark and Steph Beltrame to name a couple."

Both Clark and Beltrame are long-time staffers at CA, with former Australia captain Clark running community cricket and Beltrame the broadcasting and commercial portfolio in the executive team.

"They are absolutely pivotal in the way that we operate. So, yeah, I think there's some really strong representation," said Perry.

Australia's peerless women's team won the Twenty20 World Cup on home soil in March only days before the coronavirus suspended all domestic cricket.

Fears the women's game might be diminished as part of a cost-cutting restructure to deal with the impact of COVID-19 were allayed this week, with the board confirming the full summer schedule would be retained. — **Reuters**



FEATURES

Painting a giant artwork of His Majesty's face in the peak of Musandam

It is becoming a landmark in Musandam, a giant artwork of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq's face overlooking the scenic mountains of valley of the governorate. The man behind it is artist Abdulaziz al Shehhi and Oman Observer chatted with him to understand what drove him to create such a massive masterpiece... **page 20**

PHOTO BY AWF AL SHHEHI

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NEWS**

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'Into the Wild' bus removed from Alaska trail for safety concerns



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Little engines that can: Zagreb's model train museum



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Painting a giant artwork of His Majesty's face in the peak of Musandam

BY TITASH CHAKRABORTY

A self-taught artist working with the Ministry of Culture & Heritage in Musandam, Abdulaziz Ahmed Ali Al-Shehhi or more commonly known as Aziz Al Shehhi recently went viral as the 'Mountain Artist'.

His fame recently exploded after his artwork of Sultan Haitham's face on one of the peaks of Musandam was shared thousands of times on social media. But even during the time of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, Aziz has already been doing such yearly endeavour.

His journey started at the young age of 10 and took a turn when he met the famously known local artist Anwar Sonya — recognised globally for his stupendous contribution to the content, form, identity and character of Omani art.

Anwar Sonya and his work played an intrinsic role in building Aziz's skills as an artist and into creating his very own art style as his talent gradually progressed.

Soon enough, Aziz had found his direction in life and drawing and painting had gone beyond a passion and become a life-style — delving into different mediums and art forms including pencil, watercolour, graffiti and digital art — morphing and adapting to his style to where his passion takes him.

Oman Daily Observer reached out to Aziz Al Shehhi, aka "The

Mountain Artist" and here's what he had to share with us.

YOUR ART PIECE OF HIS MAJESTY HAS RECEIVED A LOT OF ATTENTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA, WHAT WAS YOUR IDEA BEHIND DOING THIS PIECE? WHAT MEDIUM DID YOU USE TO CREATE THE PIECE AND WHAT ISSUES DID YOU FACE?

AZIZ: Every year, for the past five years, I find myself atop of mountain or hill to make my canvas and do a portrait of His Majesty, usually with a backdrop that displays the beauty of the Sultanate of Oman and the region I come from. The biggest challenge I faced to do this piece was the location and its altitude. At about 1200 meters above ground, not only did I have to get there myself but also bringing along all the tools and paints I would need to do such a major piece. Although the perfect location, this natural canvas was far from perfect to paint on and had its own set of difficulties that I had to work-around.

WHAT IS YOUR MAIN SOURCE OF INSPIRATION?

AZIZ: My surrounding. The mountains, the sea, palm trees and the many offerings our country's nature has to offer. Irrespective of where you are, there is always inspiration in the nature around us. Another great inspiration, especially behind my interest in Graffiti would be the street

artist Banksy.

WHO ARE YOUR FAVOURITE ARTISTS, AND STYLES THAT YOU ADORE?

AZIZ: I enjoy all forms of fine art but especially enjoy graffiti and water-colour. Artistes whose works I love are local Omani artist Salem Al Salami and Emirati artist Abdel Qader Al Rayyes along with international names like Banksy, Rembrandt and Van Gogh.

WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF AS AN ARTIST IN THE FUTURE?

AZIZ: In Oman, my aim and ambition is to become the first artist in the Sultanate to paint a mural or graffiti on a building and someday be the first person out of the region to get a Guinness World Record by creating the worlds biggest graffiti on a mountain or building

A MESSAGE FOR OUR YOUNG ARTISTS?



AZIZ: My message to young artists is to be ambitious, to persevere, strive and achieve their ambitions, but step by step and everything comes with patience. Art needs patience and diligence.

To join this Mountain Artist's journey, follow him on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter [@aziz_alshihi77](#).

FEATURES

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



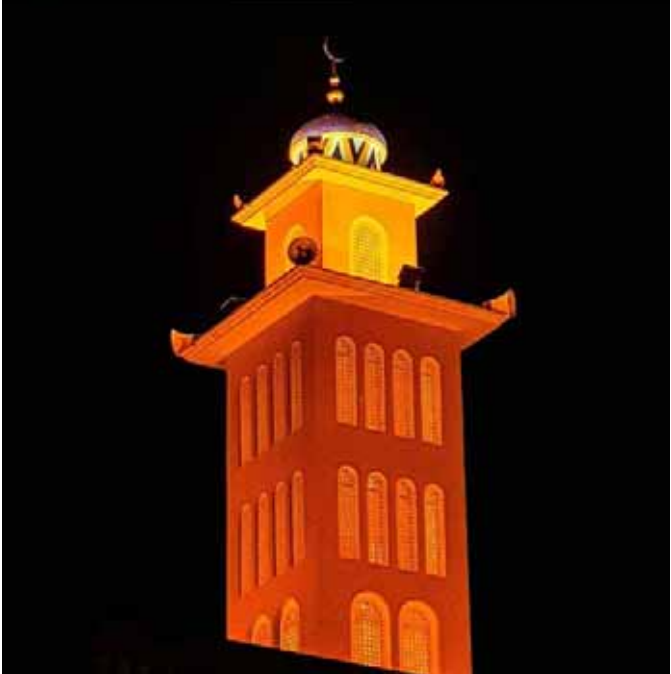
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‘Into the Wild’ bus removed from Alaska trail for safety concerns



ANCHORAGE, ALASKA: The “Into the Wild” bus is no longer in the wild. Alaska officials on Thursday airlifted from a remote trail outside Denali National Park the wrecked bus made famous by the 1996 book and 2007 movie “Into the Wild,” removing an object that drew hundreds of fans and sightseers. Too many people were putting themselves at risk trekking to the site where adventurer Christopher McCandless died of starvation in 1992, officials said.

“We encourage people to enjoy Alaska’s wild areas safely, and we understand the hold this bus has had on the popular imagination,” Alaska Natural Resources Commissioner Corri Feige said in a statement. “However, this is an abandoned and deteriorating vehicle that was requiring dangerous and costly rescue efforts. More importantly, it was costing some visitors their lives,” Feige said. The Alaska Department of Natural Resources and

Alaska Army National Guard worked jointly to remove the 1940s-era bus. Over the years, several people making pilgrimages to the bus became injured or stranded. Two drowned in river crossings. In April a stranded Brazilian tourist was evacuated, and in February five Italian tourists were rescued. The local mayor called the bus removal “a big relief.” “For public safety, we know it’s the right thing,” Denali Borough Mayor Clay Walker told Reuters. “At the

same time, it is part of our history and it does feel a little bittersweet to see a piece of our history go down the road.” The bus was hauled to the trail about 60 years ago by a road crew, Walker said. “It turned into a perilous attraction that needed to be addressed,” he said. The ultimate fate of the dilapidated bus is unknown. The Department of Natural Resources statement said it is being kept in a “secure location” pending a decision about its disposal. — Reuters

FEATURES



Little engines that can: Zagreb's model train museum

SOARING OVER MOUNTAIN gorges, past snowy ski slopes and into bustling stations, the trains in Antun Urbic's minuscule landscape enthral visitors to his model rail museum in Zagreb.

The Backo Mini Express Museum, the largest of its kind in southeastern Europe, boasts more than a kilometre (half a mile) of tiny tracks traversing picturesque rural villages and city squares wrought in extraordinary detail.

More than 2,500 figurines including mountaineers, wedding guests, police, con-

struction workers and commuters populate the scenes.

Urbic, who opened the museum in 2015, fell in love with trains 60 years ago when his father gave him a model set.

"It was the only toy that moved by itself," said the 66-year-old who goes by the nickname Backo.

He started building sets in the attic of his Zagreb home before moving to a bigger space where he invited friends over to model with him.

"It began as a hobby," he told AFP.

After spending four years piecing together a large-scale model, he opened the museum to the public.

Since then, the site has attracted 25,000 people a year, including model train enthusiasts from the United States, Australia and India.

The museum reopened in May after closing for nearly three months under Croatia's coronavirus lockdown.

"We could hardly wait to come here again," said Davorin Bozic, a regular accompanied by his three enthusiastic children.

Eight-year-old Jan Zelic's favourite detail is in a cemetery where a hand sticks out from a grave.

"It's really fun," he said.

His father Sasa, a 38-year-old economist, praised the "precise mechanics and imagination needed to construct all this. I was particularly impressed with the ski slope."

The scene features miniature skiers zig-zagging down a slalom run inspired by the one on nearby Medvednica, which hosts the men's and women's World Cup.

It is the only model museum in Europe with skiers actually descending a mountainside instead of being glued to the slopes, according to Urbic.

Among them are two figurines of Croatian skiing stars — siblings Ivica and Janica Kostelic — now retired.

The latter is depicted skiing with only one pole as she famously did after dropping the other during a 2006 World Cup race when she won bronze.

"Everyone perceives this as a children's game but it is far from that," said Urbic's associate Zvonko Cebalo.

"There is a concentration of knowledge — electronic, electric, IT, robotic." — **AFP**